
3.5 Business Community

“Homelessness is everyone’s problem. For too long it has fallen to social agencies and church groups. It is time the business community stepped in and put their shoulder to the wheel.”

● Business thinking

Members of the business community were eager to apply business thinking to what has been traditionally viewed as a social problem. The business associations, for example, made direct links to how the homeless situation negatively impacted their business, and created havoc with their clients. They were at once compassionate and pragmatic.

Several ideas were offered as to the business community’s role: establishing measures and outcomes, strategic implementation, influencing Government, and making ending homelessness an element of corporate citizenship planning. They also wanted to be counted on for more than just money. They wanted to be counted on in the planning stages, and also if problems arise.

“They have nowhere to go. They are hungry. They are addicted. Of course they will do what it takes to survive. Our challenge is trying to run an operation that respects the homeless person and not at the expense of our customers and businesses.”

“What will it take? Lots of driving the energy of the city up. A vibrant and vital project that captures the imagination of the entire community.”

“Just as the agencies could offer us ideas into our traditional ways of doing business, we can offer ideas and challenge them on the way things have always been done. They are already very creative, and we can get them to be creative in new ways and think outside the norm. We are very good at Possibility Thinking.”

● Marketing and positioning

The business-based groups also felt that strong marketing and positioning would ‘make or break’ the initiative.

“We can lose control of the marketing and run the risk of framing it as cynical and skeptical. Or we can take charge of the marketing and promote its potential and possibility.”

“We need to position this as the project that could be the model to end homelessness. That ending homelessness is valued and important to us as a city.”

“We need to brand ending homelessness in Edmonton, and include the strong brands of others willing to do what it takes. Rotary would be a very strong brand to include.”



Meeting the challenges

The business community also had good insight into the challenges inherent in ending homelessness such as cultural components, chronic problems, the need for flexibility and collaboration within government.

“Edmonton has a unique challenge that Calgary doesn’t: a high population of natives in the city, and reserves surrounding us that are very vulnerable to losing their young people into the city.”

“The chronic homeless are not just waiting to get out of the situation and suddenly become productive individuals; they often have chronic problems and may not become a productive part of society and that needs to be OK. They can and should be looked after.”

“We need to create the coalitions necessary, and they need to be very flexible to address the chronically homeless. There is a significant need for collaboration between all levels of government. The provincial government must stop thinking in silos.”

Business model

Business leaders felt that homelessness could be ended by using a business approach.

“The approach must be based on a business plan. Can we put a financial model in place to show benefit of taking action?”

“The business of homelessness: use targets, outcomes, measures.”

The rules of competition even for business change when a major project is underway. If we get an international contract, we partner with our competition. The problem of homelessness is so big - we need to adopt strategic partnerships to address it.